



Community Theater *Thrives* At Niven-Adams Opera House

By **Bethany Nesheim**
Clearwater Communications

What is it like to be part of a theatrical production that runs longer than just a few performances? Those involved in the summer productions at New Rockford's Niven-Adams Opera House learn this every summer. While other summer theaters run a weekend or two, these young adults get a feel for acting as a professional career. They experience a wide variety of audiences from night to night and have the challenge of keeping the show fresh.

New Rockford native Deb Belquist was key in developing the idea for the Opera House out of her passion for theater. She and a handful of others helped organize the Dakota Prairie Regional Center for the Arts (DPRCA) in 1991, which has the Opera House as one of its primary responsibilities. Her husband, Bob, has owned a dental practice in New Rockford for more than 20 years, and she holds degrees in both music and theater from North Dakota State University.

The building selected for the theater is called the 'Niven' building, which was built in 1910. The upstairs was originally an opera house, and it served as an auditorium for a variety of things such as political gatherings and boxing

matches, according to Belquist. Through its early days, the lower level was a mercantile and then a furniture store, but the current design of the building has been flip-flopped. The lower level has been renovated into a theatre and the upstairs left open.

Renovations on the theater continue. This summer visitors will notice a new front on the three buildings that house the DPRCA. The theater lobby has been renovated to include a coffee and snack bar, and the opera house has a new sound booth and additional seating.

Belquist says the cast of each production is usually quite small, but the actors are paid and the DPRCA receives strong support from the community. Sometimes they perform in both summer shows, but Belquist says each cast has different needs. Most work a different job in the morning, such as farm work, coaching T-ball or waiting tables, while performing their shows in the evening. A house in town is available for them if they need a place to live. And, those who are in both summer shows rehearse in the afternoon between work and evening performances.

In the past 15 years, those involved with the opera house have seen the program grow and become well established in the community. Kevin Cartwright from Cando is an area actor who has been involved in the theater from the beginning. "Kevin and I have worked together for years and have



New Rockford's Niven-Adams Opera House before and after recent renovations.

Recent Niven-Adams productions illustrate the diversity of the acting talent. At left, Lenae Lies and Samantha Bennefeld in the 2005 performance of *Don't Hug Me*. At center, Andrea Thoreson, Sarah Smith, Bethany Orn, Mark Birkeland and Kelan Moser perform in *Tapestry: The Music of Carole King*. At right, Rock Rindy, Kelan Moser, Lenae Lies, Samantha Bennefeld and Ben Allmaras in *Don't Hug Me*.

run the show so long that we just know what to do each time summer comes," Belquist says.

Both Belquist and Cartwright do a lot of set building and design, and both take ticket reservations by phone. Belquist directs and choreographs the shows as well, although a group from NDSU did the very first production, *Lend Me A Tenor*, in 1991. There were 20 performances the first year and since then, the summer shows have grown to 40, with two different plays being held between mid-June and mid-August.

Rock Rindy was asked by Belquist to be part of last summer's production of *Don't Hug Me*, and his wife helped him make up his mind by telling him he was "too old" get involved. That was all the encouragement Rindy needed to take the risk of working with the diverse group at DPRCA.

Lynnae Lies also took a chance in being part of the 2005 performance. "When Deb asked me, I originally said 'no way.' I'd never done this kind of thing, but here I am," she said after one of last year's shows. A teacher in New Rockford, she is married and has three children.

The other three roles in 2005 were played by high school and college students, including Kelan Moser, Ben Allmaras and Sam Bennefeld. "In a small community, this brings people together in the arts, which is something they wouldn't normally do," says Bennefeld, a senior at New Rockford High School.

Allmaras, now a junior at Mayville State University, completed his second DPRCA production in *Don't Hug Me*. "Our audience comes from all over the place – people from out-of-state are here visiting family and it's a big deal for them to come see the show each year."

Moser and his older brother have each spent four summers acting in the opera house. "I've been in the audience and loved the setting and professionalism," says Moser, a senior at Jamestown College. "So when I got a call from her my thought was, 'take the risk and do it or you're letting a great opportunity pass by.'"

The 2006 summer shows include *The Foreigner*, by Larry Shue, which will open on June 21, and *Monky Business*, a musical comedy by Mueller, Boland, and Opelka opening July 26. Both shows will have 20 performances each.

Those involved with the show say they have noticed the theater's economic impact on the community, with local restaurants, gas stations and businesses in the area benefiting as people come to town for the shows. "It's the kind of investment we need in North Dakota to encourage young people to stay and raise their families here," says Rindy. "I've seen a dozen people on my mail route who have moved back from the cities for quality of life, and this kind of yearly event plays a part in that."

NORTH DAKOTA SUMMER THEATER

Several North Dakota theaters staged productions earlier this summer. Others scheduled in the next few months include:

BISMARCK

Shade Tree Players

Wind in the Willows
July 13-16

Gooney Bird Greene

July 20-23

Kokonut Island

August 10-13

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe

August 17-20

The Little Prince

August 3-6

701-258-4998, 701-214-1061

www.shadetreeplayers.com

Sleepy Hollow

Summer Theatre

Hello Dolly

July 20-30

The Fantasticks

August 3-6

701-258-6343

www.shst.org

DEVILS LAKE

Fort Totten Little Theater

Beauty and the Beast

Wednesdays, Thursdays,

Saturdays and Sundays in July

701-662-8888

www.tottentrailinn.com

DICKINSON

The Little Mermaid

July 8-15

701-483-4542

www.mctinc.org

GRAND FORKS

Crimson Creek Players

Cabaret

August 1-8, 9-11

701-746-5500 or 701-777-4090

GRAND RAPIDS

LaMoure County

Summer Musical Theatre

Dracula: The Musical?

August 10-13

701-883-5230

www.lcsmt.com

FARGO

Trollwood Summer Theater

Autobahn

July 5-8

Fiddler on the Roof

July 13-15, 19-23, 26-30

701-241-4799 or 701-241-6041

www.trollwood.org

LANGDON

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs

July 17, July 21-22

701-291-3458

www.nlac.us

MANDAN

Melodramas at Fort Lincoln

State Park

Thursday through Saturday, June 22-

August 12

701-667-6380

www.fortlincoln.com

MEDORA

Bully, the Play

June 2-September 3

Medora Musical

June 2-September 3

1-800-633-6721

www.medora.com

Recollections of Murder

and Mayhem in Medora

Friday, Saturday and Sunday

through August 13

701-623-4355

www.nd.gov/hist (DeMores historic site link)

MINOT

Minot Area Theatrical Society

Shakespeare Moments (Billy

in the Park)

July 23-24

Alice in Wonderland

August 10-13

Run for Your Wife

September 7-8, 10

701-852-2290

Minot State University

Godspell

June 13-18

Seussical

July 22-23, July 25-29

701-858-3172

www.minotstateu.edu/theatre

NEW ROCKFORD

Niven-Adams Opera House

The Foreigner

20 performances beginning June 21

Monky Business

20 performances beginning July 26

VALLEY CITY

Clue, the Musical

July 26-30

701-845-4324

WALHALLA

Frost Fire Theatre

The Sound of Music

14 shows from June 25 to August 6

701-549-3600

www.frostfiretheatre.com

WILLISTON

Youth Education on Stage

Summer Shorts

June 26-29

Benny the Burro

July 18-20

How to Succeed in Business

Without Even Trying

August 8-10

701-577-3179

bmike@nemontel.net

For more information on the Niven-Adams Opera House, visit the website at www.dprca.com. Ticket information is available at dprca@hotmail.com. The phone numbers for purchasing tickets are 701-947-2174 or 701-947-2395.